

EPISTLE: ST. JAMES

3



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PRACTICE QUIZ

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James chapter two concluded with a warning that faith without works is dead (2:26). But what does the saint mean by “works?” What things are we supposed to do in faith? St. James begins to answer this question by focusing on one extremely prevalent, but extremely difficult, work: controlling what we say.

He starts by warning that not everyone who might be so inclined should teach in the Church, because religious teachers will “receive a stricter judgment” (3:2). The problem was that there were people who wanted to be teachers because they wanted attention and respect. There are two dangers with such an attitude. First, as Fr. Lawrence Farley says, “Teachers’ words affect many, and so if their teaching misleads, many others suffer harm. That is the reason they will incur more judgment on the Last Day.” Secondly—and this is directly related to the rest of chapter three—there is a great danger in failing to live out what we teach; St. John Chrysostom is said to have warned that God’s judgment throws “out the pride of those who do not want to practice what they preach.”

Since St. James started

the chapter with teachers, the work on which he focuses here is speaking (or, as he simply puts it, “the tongue” (3:5)). We all make mistakes (3:2)—a perfect person, however, is one who can control his or her tongue, just as one can control a horse with a small bridle or a ship with a relatively small rudder (3:2-4). As St. Cyril of Alexandria teaches, “The effective proof of a sound mind and perfect thought is to have nothing faulty on our tongue and to keep our mouths closed when necessary.”

Unfortunately, however, our tongues can be like a raging forest fire, destroying our bodies and souls (3:5-6). Venerable Bede puts it like this: “The tongue is a fire which can destroy a whole forest of good works just by saying things which are evil.” Our speech is such a powerful force in our lives that St. James notes it leads us to this pitiful situation: humans have tamed every type of animal, and yet we cannot “tame the tongue” (3:7-8). In fact, we can contrast our terrible state with that of a flowing spring of water, or a fig tree or grapevine: a spring does not gush out both fresh and salt water, and fig trees cannot grow such fruit as olives, and yet our mouths are capable of putting out both blessings for God *and* curses for other people (3:9-12). We need to work to overcome this corruption of what should be our natural state because, as Andreas of Caesarea writes, “Nothing bitter should come out of a mouth which has uttered the praise of so great a mystery, nor should the tongue say anything which is

unworthy of a holy mouth.”

Here’s another problem: what if we have *just enough* self-control that we can pretend to be wise and understanding? Our speech and actions should reflect that we are meek and spiritually wise (3:13). If, however, deep inside we are filled with self-centeredness and envy, then we should not make any pretense of being holy (3:14, 16)—such a dishonest claim is “earthly” (coming from human thought rather than God), “sensual” (dominated by our sinful passions), and “demonic” (open to influence from Satan and his minions) (3:15). Instead of giving in to such influences, we should be filled and guided by the “wisdom that is from above,” which “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy” (3:16-17).

LIFE TIP

Abbess Thaisia of Leushino explains how we can use our gift of speech to help others: “The gift of speech was also given to us that we might understand one another, not through instinct, like the dumb animals, but through intellect. Thus we verbally express our ideas, which are abundantly and clearly opened to us by our God-enlightened mind, the source of thought and word, in order that we might conduct intelligent, mutual, brotherly conversation on the aim of daily life and its regulation, for mutual edification and benefit, in support and consolation of each other, and the like.”

